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WASHINGTON

Ailing CIA Director William Casey was praised Monday for boosting CIA influence and morale and the man nominated to replace him, Deputy Director Robert Gates, was described as a professional with respect for Congress.

But some Democrats, even while praising Casey, criticized agency actions and one said the 73-year-old Casey's decision to step down was "in the national interest."

Both Democrats and Republicans praised the 43-year-old Gates, a 20-year veteran of the agency, and predicted that, if confirmed, he would do a better job than Casey in making the agency's case before congressional oversight committees.

Sen. David Durenberger, R-Minn., Senate Intelligence Committee chairman in the last Congress, said Casey was "as good a Director of Central Intelligence as you're ever going to get in this country."

"The intelligence community has never been closer together than it is today and that is Bill Casey's work," Durenberger said.

But he said Casey's failings were in his dealings with Congress.

"He left us with the impression that he was a reluctant participant in the (congressional oversight) process," Durenberger said. "Bill is not going to volunteer information."

Durenberger said Gates, who joined the CIA in 1966 and has been a specialist in intelligence analysis, "is a professional with a respect for the oversight process that he has demonstrated in the past and will continue to demonstrate."

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee in the last Congress, said Casey "significantly increased morale at the CIA" but he also undermined the agency's relations with Congress.

"He so strongly supported covert actions -- in fact, substituted covert action policies for foreign policy in a way that built up a layer of distrust."

He said Gates "is still going to have to be asked did he know at any time that members of the CIA were illegally involved with Colonel North, what did he do to stop it ... and why wasn't our committee notified of that?"

Sen. David Boren, D-Okla., the new Senate Intelligence Committee chairman, also said Casey made "a significant contribution to improving the morale of those who worked at the agency and to increased funding for vital national security activities" during his six-year tenure as director.

Boren said he has discussed with Gates the need to "share information and ideas on a completely candid basis," adding he looked forward to building "mutual trust" between the CIA and congressional oversight committees.

Secretary of State George Shultz promised "full cooperation" with Gates, calling him a "worthy successor" to Casey and a "genuine professional with deep knowledge of all aspects of the intelligence community."

But despite the overall praise, some Democrats were critical of the CIA under Casey's six-year tenure as director.

"Overall, I don't think he's done anything to enhance the image of the CIA," said Rep. Larry Smith, D-Fla., a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "I am frankly very happy that he resigned."

Smith, who has crossed swords with Casey during hearings on the Iran arms scandal, said "I think it's in the national interest that he resign."

Rep. Dave McCurdy, D-Okla., a member of the House Intelligence Committee, also gave Casey mixed reviews, commending his boosting of the CIA's influence but criticizing its "adventuristic moves and covert actions" in Central America.

"I think covert actions in Central America were damaging to the agency and much of that was Casey's doing," said McCurdy.